

The Earth Charter, Globalization and Sustainable Community

by Larry Rasmussen

The dream of a common Earth ethic and the unity of humankind is a hoary one, at least as old as the Hebrew prophets, Confucius, the Buddha, Plato and Jesus. That should surprise no one since religions themselves, together with ancient philosophies and the primordial visions of first peoples, have consistently staked out a highly audacious claim for “community.” It is community sufficiently generous to include not only the neighbors (at least those we like!) but Earth as a whole, indeed the cosmos *in toto*. Creation as a community has not only been the aged and enduring dream; it has been a basic religious, moral, even metaphysical, claim.

Humans dream these dreams because community provides answers to restive stirrings deep within our souls. Indeed, religion and ethics may well arise from a yearning to align our lives with an order that outstrips them, an order attuned to the same powers that flung the stars and planets into their orbits, an order in which we are truly home to the universe itself.

In our time the old dream has found realization in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, posited as it is on the notion of universal human dignity and endorsed as a common moral standard and instrument for all peoples everywhere. By all counts, it has been a powerful means for effecting and institutionalizing universal moral claims.

New Moral Universe Based on Respect for the Full Community of Life

The Earth Charter Movement and the Charter itself belong to the deep tradition of this irrepressible dream of Earth as a comprehensive community guided by a shared ethic. There are a couple new twists, however. The most remarkable one, at least for the children of modernity, is to render the ethics of *homo sapiens* derivative of Earth’s requirements and to consider the whole community of life the bearer of compelling moral claims. “Respect Earth and life in all its diversity” is the fundamental principle of the Earth Charter. It is



in fact the parallel of human dignity, or respect for every human life, as the baseline of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But the parallel hides a moral revolution. The fabled “turn to the human subject” of modern Western ethics—a turn underlying modern psychology, philosophy, economics, politics, and the omnipotent science and technology of the industrial paradigm itself, as well as the turn that issued in the notion of human rights itself—this is the turn rejected by the Earth Charter and its moral world. The language is mild and careful and never truly confrontational, but the Earth Charter is an assault on the institutionalized anthropocentrism of reigning practices and their morality, especially patterns of production and consumption. To say “humanity is part of a vast evolving universe” and to view Earth as a remarkable niche in that universe, and alive, because it is the bearer and sustainer of a unique community of life, is already to dislodge the morally transcendent human subject and invert the orientation of prevailing ethics. In fact, the very moral universe that gave us universal human rights does not accord with the Earth Charter ethic. The Earth Charter wants to de-center the sovereign human self (historically, an androcentric and white Western self) who is the moral legislator and whose very notion of freedom rests in giving ourselves the laws we live by. It wants to locate the ecology of all human action within the economy of Earth itself and temper the sovereign swagger of idolatrous human powers parading mastery on a grand scale. But the universal rights tradition *combines* the rightful assertion of human dignity as the norming norm *with* a practical and deeply institutionalized morality of the sovereign human subject as legislator over all else. This the Charter does not accept, even though it deeply affirms the dignity of all human beings and the ascription of freedom, equality and respect to every person as a condition of human fulfillment.

There is another theme that puts the Earth ethic of the Charter far from the reigning moral universe of present institutions and daily habits. Cosmologies now emerging in science, namely ones in which the web of life spreads to embrace distant galaxies and all thirteen to fifteen billion years of the epic of evolution, have little place in our moral sensibilities and conventions. Most all present worlds, at least dominant ones, still regard humans morally as an ecologically segregated species. So we moved more rocks and soil and water in the 20th century than did volcanoes and glaciers and tectonic plates, and we altered the thin envelope of the atmosphere more in that time than all humans together in previous and far longer stretches of

time, yet none of this registered as a profoundly moral matter, much less a moral crisis.

In sum, the Earth Charter is trying to line out what Earth as *Earth community* means for ethics and moral agency. In moral theory it means de-centering the sovereign human self and in practice it means re-doing the world created by that self, what the words of an earlier draft dubbed as no less than “reinvent[ing] industrial-technological civilization.” This primacy of Earth community for ethics—or a communitarian understanding of nature and society together, with the economy of Earth basic to all—is the new twist, at least for the modern era.

High Level of Representation in Creation of Earth Charter

Still another remarkable quality of the Earth Charter is its genesis and generation, the drafting process itself. The Charter initially failed. It was to be the international product of nation-state negotiations climaxed at the Earth Summit in Rio, 1992. That did not happen. The Earth Charter Commission, gifted with remarkable leadership, then decided to re-launch the effort as a global civil society initiative. This grass-roots participation by communities and associations of all kinds resulted in what has been termed “a people’s treaty.” It is not a true “treaty,” negotiated by appointed sovereigns and signed by their national bodies, but there is a call for the Charter’s endorsement by the UN General Assembly in 2002 as a “soft law” document. Furthermore, its drafting has been coordinated with a genuine “hard law treaty” underway as “The International Covenant on Environment and Development.” This renders the Charter more than an inspirational document for a developing global consciousness and an educational tool and guide for action in many quarters, important as these are. It has the substance of a genuine charter seeking universal recognition and backed by international law.

The specific point about genesis and process, however, is the Charter’s rarity among time-worn efforts at a global ethic. Few have been generated from the bottom up—or more precisely, from high levels of participation cutting across virtually all sectors of society, with a determined effort to include historically under-represented voices. Past efforts at an Earth ethic were far less representative, and to my knowledge none were carried out by way of a democratic consultative process this open with this much revision over time. It is a remarkable instance, made possible by electronic



globalization, of what in fact may be an emerging global society tuned to local communities and bio-regions as well as myriad forms of expertise from every quarter—government, business, academe. Against the homogenizing forces of economic globalization, the Charter process has seen new local coalitions and cross-cultural alliances emerge. Dimensions of local and regional belonging have been strengthened and given voice in the face of economic invasions that have tended to weaken them and render them dependent—usually in the name of interdependence itself!

What Brought on the Earth Charter

What brought on the Earth Charter Movement has been laid out in different ways. Theodore Roszak says that ecological problems cannot “be fully solved, if at all, by the nation-state, the free-trade zone, the military alliance, or the multinational corporation.”¹ These “awkwardly improvised human structures”² are powerful, but they aren’t up to the task of addressing their own macroconsequences spread across a humanly dominated biosphere. Some kind of reinvention of inner and outer worlds together is necessary.

Lester Brown’s “take” is that we are looking at the need for an environmental revolution on an order of magnitude that matches the agricultural and industrial revolutions—and necessarily transforms them at the same time. Like the agricultural revolution, the environmental revolution will also dramatically alter population trends. But whereas the agricultural “set the stage for enormous increases in human numbers,” the environmental “will succeed only if it stabilizes population size” in ways that establish “a balance between people and nature.” And in contrast to the industrial revolution, “which was based on a shift to fossil fuels,” the environmental will have to shift away from them, on some other base.³

Thomas Berry is the most dramatic of these witnesses. History is governed, he says, by overarching movements “that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe.”⁴

¹ Theodore Roszak, “Where Psyche Meets Gaia,” *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, eds. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 1.

² Roszak, “Where Psyche Meets Gaia,” *Ecopsychology*, 2.

³ Lester Brown, “Foreword,” *Ecopsychology*, xv.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 1.

Such a movement can be called “the Great Work” of a people and age. And the great work before us is effecting the transition “from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans [are] present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.”⁵ Berry does not shrink from describing this as nothing less than a shift of geological ages: from the Cenozoic, with its “irrational exuberance”⁶ of life forms, to either the Technozoic, which essentially places the human as subject *vis-à-vis* all else as object, and extends present arrangements, or the Ecozoic, that age of mutually enhancing relationships struck between humans and the rest of the community of life.

Among Christian ethicists, Douglas Sturm approaches Berry’s scale. The key point in Sturm’s formidable essay on the Earth Charter, titled: “Identity and Otherness: Summons to a New Axial Age (Perspectives on the Earth Charter Movement),”⁷ is that the recent turn to human subjectivity in ethics and society, as expressed in the varied modalities of modernity, was a subjectivity that saw all else—the supposedly external world—as fair game for manipulation, whether non-human or human. Thus an Enlightenment movement that both sought and proclaimed human liberation led by emancipated reason ended up organizing patterns of widespread domination of nature and of peoples considered “close to nature.”⁸ The need, Sturm argues, is for intersubjectivity, a subjectivity that understands relations to be profoundly internal, since interdependency is our lot at every level and the

⁵ Berry, *The Great Work*, 3.

⁶ With apologies to Alan Greenspan for using his phrase (about stock market behavior) completely out of context.

⁷ Douglas Sturm, “Identity and Otherness: Summons to a New Axial Age (Perspective on the Earth Charter Movement),” an essay published by the Forum on Religion and Ecology, c/o Department of Religion, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837.

⁸ It might be noted that Dietrich Bonhoeffer surmised much the same in the 1940s. What he calls “Euro-American” civilization and its neo-European extensions around the globe used the “emancipated” reason of the Enlightenment to trumpet its own autonomy in an expansionist journey of idolatrous confidence in progress and conquest, elaborated as an ethic of civilization. The Western aim, writes Bonhoeffer, is to be independent of nature. And it issues in what he calls “a new spirit,” “the spirit of the forcible subjugation of nature beneath the rule of the thinking and experimenting man.” The outcome is technology as “an end in itself” with “a soul of its own.” Its symbol “is the machine, the embodiment of the violation and exploitation of nature.” See his *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 98.



fiery core of ancient stars our origin. The Earth Charter is premised on such intersubjectivity as this.⁹

What's at Stake in the Earth Charter – Sustainable Community

Finally, to understand the meaning of the Earth Charter, let's look at what's at stake in its implementation by a focus on one area: sustainable development or sustainable community? The going lingo for the ways of global capitalism is "globalization," meaning the process of an increasingly porous movement of information, money, goods, images, ideas, and people across countries and cultures, driven above all by the progressive integration of all these elements into a single geopolitical economy. The players are many but most prominent are global corporations.

Most discussions of "sustainable development" assume the globalizing economy of corporate capitalism and seek to "green" that. That is, sustainable development is the necessary effort to wrap the global environment around the global economy in such a way that both economy and environment are sustained.

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The Earth Charter, too, uses the language of "sustainable development." Yet most of its spirit and direction accord with what might better be called "sustainable community." Sustainable community works on the principle of subsidiarity and asks how you wrap both economy and environment around local communities and bio-regions. In contrast to the ways of globalization as current corporate capitalism, even "greened" corporate capitalism, sustainable community tries to preserve or create the following: greater economic self-sufficiency locally and regionally, with a view to the bio-regions

themselves as basic to human organization; agriculture appropriate to regions and in the hands of local owners and workers using local knowledge and crop varieties, with ability to save their own seeds and treat their own plants and soils with their own products; the preservation of local and regional

⁹ Sturm, "Identity and Otherness," 8-9.

traditions, language, and cultures and a resistance to global homogenization of culture and values; a revival of religious life and a sense of the sacred, *vis a vis* a present way of life that leeches the sacred from the everyday and has no sense of mystery because it reduces life to the utilitarian; the repair of the moral fiber of society on some terms other than sovereign consumerism; resistance to the commodification of all things, including knowledge; the internalization of costs to the local, regional, and global environment in the price of goods; and the protection of ecosystems and the cultivation of Earth, in the language of the Charter, as “a sacred trust held in common.”

All this is global democratic community, not nativist localism. That is, it is not asking *whether* to “globalize,” but *how*. And its answer—democratic community democratically arrived at—is *global* community by virtue of both its planetary consciousness and the impressive networking of citizens around the world made possible by electronic globalization. But adherents of sustainable community have this, rather than “development” in mind, because they are not trying to wrap the global environment around the integrating global corporate economy. They are asking, “what makes for healthy community on successive levels—local, regional, sometimes national, and global—and how do we wrap both economy and environment around that, aware that Earth’s requirements are fundamental?” They are attentive to questions that global capitalism, even as sustainable development, rarely asks: namely, what are the essential bonds of human community and culture, as well as the bonds of the human with the more-than-human world; and what is the meaning of such primal bonds for the rendering of a healthy concrete way of life? What is cultural wealth and biological wealth and how are they sustained in the places people live with the rest of the community of life?

Sustainable community is, not, however, a panacea. Panaceas don’t exist. Nonetheless, the direction of the Earth Charter itself is correct; namely, a communitarian understanding of nature, society, even cosmos. Sustainable community offers a far more promising vision of the future than sustainable development as the green version of global capitalism. May the Earth Charter guide us in this and other areas of our lives.

